

FEAR AND TREMBLING: KIERKEGAARD'S TELEOLOGY

In this essay, we will look at how Kierkegaard's suspension of teleology casts doubts on the consistency of ethical knowledge in relation to The Binding of Isaac: Kierkegaard passionately argues in favor of this position by providing examples in opposition to the popular Hegelian ethics. Although mentioned in many of Kierkegaard's philosophical writings, (which I may reference) we will focus on "*Fear and Trembling*,"¹ where the philosopher writes under the pseudonym Johannes de Silentio (John of the Silence.) Kierkegaard makes his case using Johannes de Silentio from the perspective of someone who is at least sympathetic to Hegelian ideals.



Fig 1. 17th century oil painting depicting the Biblical story of Abraham stopped from sacrificing his son Isaac by an angel, with sheep and roughhewn altar and small brazier.³

In relation to Kierkegaard's suspension of teleology: *Telos* is concerned with the effectiveness of an end, aim, or purpose. Kierkegaard compares religion (faith) as being the intermediate suspension of God's good as he discusses this teleological approach to the ethical.

Regarding to what he refers to as this so-called suspension, Kierkegaard emphasizes a sense of amelioration that occurs. In contrast to well accepted Hegelian ideals, Kierkegaard asserts that there is no independent moral ideal via this amelioration.

Kierkegaard gives four accounts of the narrative of Abraham in his book *Fear and Trembling*. Each referred to a moral conundrum and how the ensuing decisions would have an immediate impact on our capacity for observation.

He focuses on the ramifications of why it is morally wrong but religiously permissible to kill Isaac.² These examples are being used by Kierkegaard to summarize the requirement for an ethical sense of suspension.

¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings, VI, Volume 6: Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton University Press, 1983), JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt24hrjx> [accessed 22 November 2022].

² SparkNotes Editors, 'SparkNotes: Søren Kierkegaard' *SparkNotes.com*, SparkNotes LLC, <https://www.sparknotes.com/philosophy/kierkegaard/section2/> [accessed 22 November 2022].

³ Philippe de Champaigne, *The Sacrifice of Isaac* [Oil on canvas] (1602-1624) https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Philippe_de_Champaigne_-_Le_sacrifice_d%27Isaac.jpg [accessed 15 November 2022].

We will now continue our discussion of the ethical understanding that follows from applying Hegel's ethical principles, and how Kierkegaard requires a component that goes beyond conventional ethical knowledge to attribute his “teleological suspension.”

THE ETHICAL

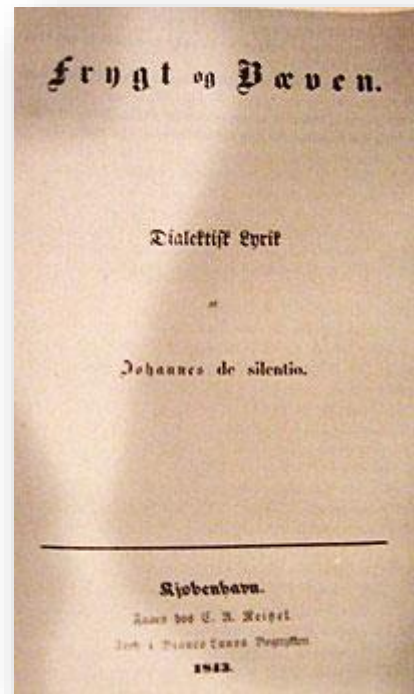
Does the ethical have a teleological suspension? This is *Fear and Trembling*⁴ PROBLEMA I's⁵ initial query. Johannes makes it clear that there is a single, timeless notion of what is morally right. He holds that everything outside of itself has an ultimate purpose (or telos), which is ethical. (As Hegelianism implies)

Johannes writes:

The ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone, which from another angle means that it applies at all times. It rests immanent in itself, has nothing outside itself that is its τέλος [end, purpose] but is itself the τέλος for everything outside itself, and when the ethical has absorbed this into itself, it goes not further. The single individual, sensately and psychically qualified in immediacy, is the individual who has his τέλος in the universal, and it is his ethical task continually to express himself in this, to annul his singularity in order.⁶

This timeless idea should guide our discussion of both past and present ethical situations. This serves as the foundation for Kierkegaard's argument on what he believes to be an important factor that was disregarded at the time due to the widespread Hegelian ideas.

According to Hegel, if this so-called ethical is the main goal, then one's self-teleological position should be one of desire toward this universal, as mentioned in Hegel's book *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.⁷ However, as we can see from the narrative of Abraham, there are times when this ethical principle seems to fall short.



⁴ Photo shown on right displays 1st edition book in native language.

⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, 'PROBLEMA I: Is There a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?' *Kierkegaard's Writings*, VI, Volume 6: *Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton University Press, 1983) pp. 54-67, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt24hrjx.8> [accessed 16 November 2022].

⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, 'PROBLEMA I: Is There a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?'.

⁷ David James, ed., *Hegel's Elements of the Philosophy of Right: A Critical Guide*, Cambridge Critical Guides (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017) <http://dx.doi.org/10.1017/9781139939560> [accessed 22 November 2022].

In order to bolster his argument, Johannes writes in a way that is consistent with Hegel's philosophy. As he says:

The ethical as such is the universal; as the universal it is in turn the disclosed. The single individual, qualified as immediate, sensate, and psychical, is the hidden. Thus his ethical task is to work himself out of his hiddenness and to become disclosed in the universal. Every time he desires to remain in the hidden, he trespasses and is immersed in spiritual trial from which he can emerge only by disclosing himself

Once again we stand at the same point. If there is no hiddenness rooted in the fact that the single individual as the single individual is higher.⁸

Johannes continues by citing instances of this highest ethical virtue, which he would ascribe to someone who would willingly give up their own interests for the benefit of everyone else. He recalls the tale of Agamemnon, a Greek father who was willing to give his daughter's life for the sake of all Greeks during the Trojan war. He recalled Junius Brutus, and how he killed his sons for defying the government, and Jephthah promising God a sacrifice if he were to vanquish the Ammonites, in doing so sacrificing his daughter.

In spite of pursuing a greater objective, each of these stories has heroes who mourned, and was mourned, for their losses. However, Kierkegaard objects to this reason of universal ethical good being the final telos, citing The Binding of Isaac, one of the most well-known tales in the Bible.

As was already indicated, the tale of Abraham presents a different perspective. Abraham was going to make a sacrifice solely for the sake of his faith, and not to further any sense of a general ethical good. This operates in stark contrast to Hegel's principles; Hegel holds that the highest universal ethical good is the highest telos there can be.⁹

Abraham would be viewed as a murderer if such were the case, but it is not the case. On the contrary, Abraham is revered as the founder of faith. This implies that God may desire us to take actions that are morally repugnant, but which are still correct. Hegel, according to Kierkegaard, was mistaken because he did not object to Abraham as the founder of faith and brand him a murderer.¹⁰

In contrast to the universal good (telos) of Hegel, Kierkegaard saw there was more to the narrative of Abraham. Identifying the component, he refers to as the "religious" and defines what it is to understand suspension of morality in service of a teleological goal. Which brings us to the core of Kierkegaard's teleological claim.

⁸ Søren Kierkegaard, 'PROBLEMA III: Was It Ethically Defensible for Abraham to Conceal His Under-Taking from Sarah, from Eliezer, and from Isaac?' *Kierkegaard's Writings, VI, Volume 6: Fear and Trembling/Repetition*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 82–120, JSTOR, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt24hrjx.10> [accessed 22 November 2022].

⁹ David James, ed., *Hegel's Elements of the Philosophy of Right*.

¹⁰ Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings, VI, Volume 6: Fear and Trembling/Repetition* pp. 62–63.

THE TELEOLOGICAL SUSPENSION

Regarding Kierkegaard's view of the teleological suspension of the ethical, he believes it necessary to discuss a different choice from the traditional notions of a moral hero (as Kierkegaard proposed in his book *Either, Or*):¹¹ *Fear and Trembling* developed on the idea of a knight of faith. "Faith is primarily this contradiction that the particular person is greater than the general,"¹² says Kierkegaard. Hegel held that there was only one universal ultimate good, but he disagrees. The element of faith appears to go beyond the purported final telos.

Both the ethical and the aesthetic are categorized by Hegel (and the ancient Greeks). They base their beliefs only on their need to fall into one of those two categories. Since the ethical may be mediated, as it is universal in nature, the algorithmic technique of mediation is crucial to the fundamental comprehension of inference and logical justification regarding the ethical.

But Abraham's tale takes place on a plain from which Hegel's theory of universal knowledge cannot be extrapolated. Abraham's experience is limited to his ethical predicament, which rules out the possibility of this ostensibly mediated insight. Abraham's narrative cannot be understood if it cannot be mediated. Therefore, it cannot be ethical.

Abraham then must be considered an aesthetic person if he does not engage in the universal. Johannes, though, thinks "Abraham is lost"¹³ if such is the case. Even Hegel would admit that faith then becomes hollow and meaningless. If so, Abraham shouldn't be honored, but he is. Hegel's ethical and aesthetic limits cannot lead to a full explanation if he is to be memorialized. Which leaves only one possibility: Kierkegaard's suspension of said ethical, necessitating the creation of a third category—that of the religious—that is superior to said aesthetic and ethical.

Unlike what you would find in Kant's Categorical Imperative,¹⁴ according to Kierkegaard, there is no independent moral formula, which adds another layer to any complexity of ethical knowledge. As previously indicated, Abraham ought to be considered a murderer in accordance with Hegel's ethical concept; he is not. We have the freedom to select the kind of life we lead—be it the life of an aesthetic hero, a moral hero, or the most difficult of all—a knight of faith.

¹¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writing, III, Part I: Either/Or*, ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton University Press, 1987), *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt24hrqz> [accessed 24 November 2022].

¹² Søren Kierkegaard, *Kierkegaard's Writings, VI, Volume 6: Fear and Trembling/Repetition*.

¹³ Søren Kierkegaard, 'PROBLEMA I: Is There a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?'

¹⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork for the Metaphysics of Morals*, ed. Allen W. Wood, (Yale University Press, 2002), *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1njwt> [accessed 24 November 2022].

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